

Letter from Alexander Graham Bell to Mabel Hubbard Bell, August 8, 1875, with transcript

(Copy) Ocean House, Nantucket. August 8th, 1875. Dear Miss Mabel:

I have come to Nantucket in hopes that you will see me, and let me tell you all that I long to say.

I am now free to explain to you the cause of my foolish and unpardonable behaviour towards you in Cambridge. — Conduct so weak and wrong that it must have outraged all your feeling of self-respect — as it has humiliated me in my own eyes.

Believe me that my acts and my words were neither in harmony with my character nor with my intentions. I am the last man in the world who would willingly give you pain.

In wounding you I have struck at my own heart — and my punishment is greater than I can bear. I have told your parents that I can no longer keep silence — that I cannot delay a day — nor an hour — in telling you of the difficult and trying position in which I had been placed in regard to you. You will see then that I was not master of myself. — And much that must have seemed to you presumptuous and out of all good taste — (as it was) — will at all events look more pardonable.

You did not know, Mabel — you were utterly uncouscious — that I had long before learned to respect and to love you.

I have loved you with a passionate attachment that you cannot understand, and that is to myself — new — and incomprehensible.

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I wished to tell you of my wish to make you my wife — if you would let me try to win your love. I had gone to your parents. I had informed them of my interest in you; and had sought from them advice and sympathy.

(?) I told them that you had never encouraged me in any way to believe that you had a thought or a feeling of affection for me otherwise than what a pupil should have towards her teacher.

I stated that my desire was to tell you — at once — openly and honourably — what was in my heart; and to ask your permission to continue my visits at your father's house — in the hope that I might be able in the future to win your affection to myself.

Your parents received me kindly and gently. They were surprised at what I told them — but they were not displeased . They did not offer any opposition to my wishes — but they requested me, for your sake , to conceal my feelings for a year. They feared that the revelation might harm your life . They wished you to be older and wiser before coming to the consciousness of my love. They feared you were as yet too young to understand me; and that you might receive me in a childish way.

I could not myself believe this. I felt that you could not but feel honoured that you had won the affections of an honest heart; and that — whatever your own wishes might be — it would be a comfort for you — as you grew older — to feel that there was at least one who was willing to devote his life to your happiness.

In my letter to your mother — I said: -

“I am willing to be guided entirely by your advice for I know that a mother's love will surely decide for the best interests of her child. In token of this belief I promise beforehand to abide by your decision however hard it may be for me to do so.” I had no idea that the I wished to do promise I had given was to cover a year of misery for me, and

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unconsciousness for you. I wished to do whatever was best for you, and so bowed to the wishes of your parents, and decided not to speak of the matter to you for one year.

I thought alone of you , Mabel, and not at all of myself, I did not occur to me to measure the breadth and depth of my affection so as to consider whether it was possible for me wholly to conceal it.

My Pride told me I could do it. In whatever circumstances I have hitherto been placed I have always been able to control my emotions.

Your parents had confidence in me — and I had confidence in myself — and so I went openly into temptation . I was allowed to be alone with you. On Harvard Class Day — when you so innocently and unconsciously asked me whether I should like to be engaged I cannot tell you what I suffered. I felt that it was not wrong for me to tell you what was in my heart. — Nay! It seemed to me it was your right to know. I think I answered you calmly enough — but I was conscious then of my own weakness, and resolved in future to avoid conversing with you alone as much as possible.

But the trial came again.

You remember the day — Sunday — the last time we were together. I shall always remember it with shame — for the struggle in my heart was greater than I could bear — and I startled and shocked you with the strangeness of my manner.

Oh! Mabel — whatever may happen to us in the future — forgive me for that night. You do not know the pain — the agony — the shame — I have suffered on account of that one night. Hardest of all is the feeling that I have forfeited your esteem and confidence.

Your sister and your cousin accompanied us into the garden. I did not seek to go. I accompanied you and them .

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In a short while they ran on in front and out of sight evidently with the intention of leaving us alone — and I saw that my secret had been discovered by others though not by you.

Then was the time when I should have exercised my self-control, but I could not .

I was happy to have you near me — I was happy to feel your hand upon my arm — and above all I was happy and thankful that I could talk to you, and that you could understand me although the moon afforded such a feeble light.

It was so hard not to be able to tell you. I felt it was unjust to you — that it was wrong — that I should be with you so without your knowledge and consent.

And then you remember. — Your sister and your cousin brought us flowers to pluck, that we might try our fortunes.

When my flower showed “Love” — you asked me the name of the person of whom I had thought and I would not tell you — I could not tell you.

Your sister and your cousin said they knew who it was — laughed — looked at you — and ran off leaving us alone.

How different was this from what I had intended! I felt that you would learn of my affection for you — not through my honest avowal of it — but from the ridicule of your companions .

Had you not at this time run off yourself bent on reaching the house before your cousin, I should certainly have broken my promise to your parents — and have confessed all.

When we returned to the verandah I felt disheartened and in despair — and sought to hide my agitation under an assumed light and trivial manner.

I was sitting at your feet, thinking how little there was about me that could prove attractive to a light-hearted girl like you, and I thought if I could only know what your ideal of a

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husband was — I should have time — in my year of silence — to make myself like him . Scarcely was the thought conceived when — to my horror — it burst out in words. I asked you — before all who were there — “ If you could choose a husband what should you wish him to be like? ”

I have no excuse to offer for that rudeness. It was unpardonable — and I trembled for your answer.

You replied so prettily and so playfully that I felt relieved. You did not seem offended — and it all passed off in a laugh.

But with me it did not pass off. I felt that I had lowered myself in my own estimation — that my boasted control over my feelings was a failure- that I had acted as a boy and not as a man.

I felt humiliated at my own conduct, and I feared its effect upon you.

After you had gone from home — I felt so uneasy in my own mind — that at last I went to your parents — and told them that I could no longer be bound by my promise. If they wished me not to tell you — they must not give me the opportunity.

For my part — I said — I felt that if it was their right to know of my intentions — it was doubly your right to know them also. In fact — I said — that I would tell you the first chance I got. Indeed — I added — it was my intention to go right down to Nantucket for the purpose unless they positively forbade me.

I wished — I said — to be as free and open with you as I had been with them. I wished to consult your feelings as well — as theirs. — That I felt it wrong in me to visit you disguised as a friend of your father's.

That I had no intention of seeking to know your mind. Although it was the dearest wish of my heart to have you for my wife, I could not — in justice — ask you for any answer until

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you had had the opportunity of knowing me better. All I wanted was permission from you to attempt to win your affection if I could. If my visits were to be occasions of annoyance to you, when you knew their object — I should certainly respect your wishes and avoid the house.

Your parents agreed with me that it was now my duty to tell you, but they requested that I should wait until your return home on August sixth. They wanted you to be near your mother that you might meet with her sympathy in the matter — for she was sure you would be startled and distressed.

I agreed to wait, and I was waiting patiently until a very few days ago — when your mother took me aside and said that she feared I must wait still longer. She told me — very gently and very kindly — that you had formed a dislike for me — but represented it as, in her opinion, probably a childish thing — brought about by the ridicule of your companions to which you must have been subjected on my account.

I was greatly distressed — but, when I came to think the matter over in my mind — I could see how natural it was that this should be. I felt that — perhaps — after all — your mother was right — that you were more of a child than I had made allowances for — and that perhaps I had better be guided a little longer by her — as I feared by my rashness that we should be separated still more.

Still, I said that I thought I wrote to your mother, I felt that the best way to gain your regard was to be open and straightforward with you — to tell you all that was in my heart, and leave the rest to time.

In my letter to your mother you will see the picture of my thought — that you were yet too young to make due allowances for my conduct. In my heart I did you an injustice. To your parents you are — as I am still to mine — a child. I never thought so of you so — until your mother's words and your father's counsel swayed me for a moment.

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I did you an injustice — but it was only for a day or two.

I received a note from your mother — evidently in great distress — asking me to call on her. She had received a letter from you which had affected her strangely.

She had sent for me to go down to Nantucket with her immediately. By the time I reached Cambridge she had twice again changed her mind. She had first written for you ? ? to come home, and then had again directed you to stay.

She read to me a portion of your letter which showed me that I had all along been right — that you were no longer a girl — but a good true-hearted woman.

I respected you for what you had written to your mother. It made me look up to you and determine that I would no longer be guided by any other will than yours.

In reading your letter she came to one part at which she stopped. She said she could not read it to me but would merely state that she f you felt you could not trust me.

I was alarmed at this. Before I heard that letter read I had looked with no serious disquietude upon your dislike. I felt distressed at it — but I knew that as you came to know me better — you would find that my life at all events was a stainless one — and I hoped that the feeling might pass off.

But when I heard that letter read, and recognized the fact that you were no longer a girl but a woman — I felt that there was something serious behind that distrust.

(I then knew that I had wounded your gentle heart much more than I had ?? deemed possible.)

I was so distressed as to be ill. I went next morning to Cambridge to say that I must go down to see you, and I asked your mother to accompany me that morning. She could not. Both she and your father thought it best that I should wait one fortnight for your return. I

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could not conceal my distress, and they recommended me to go to my friends in Canada for a while — if I could not control my feelings.

I felt — and feel — that if your distrust was occasioned by my conduct in Cambridge — my punishment is greater than I deserve.

That you should not trust me! When I know that every thought — every feeling I have for myself — is for your happiness.

You do not know — you cannot guess — how much I love you.- How much I have desire to have the right to shield and protect you. Had I your love I feel that you could mould my life into any form you will. You of course can see no more of me than the mere outside — and I can well understand how little there is there that can prove attractive to you.

I want you to look within . — I want you to know me better before you dislike me.

There is much to admire — there is much to lament and deplore — in my inner life. But there is a wealth of love for you. There is a heart that sympathizes with you and for you a thousand times more than you do for yourself.

At last I have told your parents that I can wait no longer. I said that I should go to see you with or without their permission.

I said I wished to treat you as a woman and not as a child. That were Nantucket twenty times as far away as it was it would still be more honourable in me — and respectful towards you — to seek you out — than to await your return home. I would not go down without their knowledge. I should go openly and honourably if at all. I would give them time to make any arrangements they thought best under the circumstances — and I should be glad to have your mother accompany me if she desired to do so.

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I called on Friday evening for the purpose of assuring them that my decision meant no disrespect for their judgment.

I had tried to do my duty by them as your parents — I had respected their wishes — I had tried to force myself to obey them — but now that I knew you to be a woman capable of judging for yourself — I should respect your wishes more than theirs. If you chose to delay our meeting until your return home — or if you felt that you could not meet me at all — I should return conscious at all events that I had done what seemed to me right and proper — and most respectful to you.

I should write to you from the hotel to inform you of my coming. I would apologize to you by letter for having so cruelly wounded your feelings — and I would ask you to see me and hear all that I have to say.

If they wished to interfere with your liberty of action — of course they might. They might write a letter to you telling you not to receive me. If they could trust it to me I should see that it was delivered in time — but go I must and should.

It is unnecessary to say they did not do so. Your father said he thought I was making a great mistake — and that I should regret it. I went — he said — against his wish — but that he respected me for the way I had acted. Your mother said she thought I was right to do as I thought best — and that she would not withhold her consent.

And so Mabel I am here .

It is for you to say whether you will see me or not. I want to be true to myself . I want to show you I am something different from the thing you saw in Cambridge.

Then I was trying to do what I felt to be wrong — for your sake, and because I had promised your parents — and the consequence was I fell . I lost my own self-respect and I forfeited your esteem.

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No t w I want to do what I think to be right , and proper and I know I can act as a gentleman should. I shall not startle nor shock you any more.

I shall not betray as much feeling as you see in this letter. I shall speak to you calmly and deliberately of all I want and desire. I am determined that — however meanly you think of me now — I shall act so as at least to command your respect .

I do not want to commit you to any course of action. I shall not even ask you what your feelings are towards me — for alas! I know them already.

I merely wish that you should know my heart — and then I feel that I can leave you with the consciousness of having been true to myself — and just to you — and leave the rest all else to time.

I know I must have offended you deeply. I am proud that the prize I intend to win if I can (that is your heart , Mabel — not you) — has shown such sensibility. If you do not believe it now, you will I trust find it out in the future — that my conduct during all that week in Cambridge was no index of my character or disposition ; but that my acts and my words were wrung from me by genuine distress when I found myself placed in a false relation in regard to you.

I shall respect the resentment that you must naturally feel towards me — and shall not presume to call upon you again — nor to visit your father's house while you are there — (unless you expressly desire me to do so) — until the original year is out.

I shall rest satisfied that you know my feelings — and if you knew me — you would be sure they will remain unchanged.

I do not wish you to misunderstand the object of my visit here. I know you are surrounded by young companions who would ridicule and annoy you did they know I were here.

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Believe me I have not come to Nantucket to wound and pain you. I respect and honour you too much for that.

I have come to show my confidence and trust in you. Whatever those about you may do — I do not fear that you will ridicule the honest love I bear you — nor treat me lightly because I have offended you.

I await your answer as to whether I may see you or not.

There is only one question I want you to answer. I would like you to tell me frankly all that there is in me that you dislike and that I can alter. Perhaps it is too much to ask you to do that — so you need not unless you care to do so. I would take it as a kindness if some good friend would do it for you — if you are afraid to speak.

I wish to amend my life for you.

Whatever may be the result of whatever results this visit — believe me now and ever,

Yours affectionately, A. Graham Bell. Miss Mabel G. Hubbard, Care of H. Scudder, Esq., Siasconset, Nantucket.